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CALAVERAS EVENING

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A Calaveras Evening

With Mark Twain and Bret Harte

A Diversion for the English Class

Perhaps it were well for us, a part of the time at least, to turn our eyes toward California as a source of literary material. If California is ever to come into her own as a land of the poet, the musician, the artist, it must be by herself becoming the heart of the literary and artistic life of her people. It is important for us to know and to feel the atmosphere of our own home land. There is something in this for California Teachers to ponder.

EDWARD HYATT
Superintendent Public Instruction

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A DIVERSION FOR THE ENGLISH CLASS.

To Teachers of English in California Schools:

Fellow teachers, you will perhaps be surprised at my hardihood in suggesting anything in a field you know so much better than I; nevertheless, I venture to urge a point well known to many of you, and yet well worth repeating once in awhile. It is this:

Make of your Literature a PLEASANT thing to your children. Show them how to get joy out of it. Leave them hungry for more of it. Make of it Experiences in their lives. Make it live for them as do the incidents of their daily lives. So shall Literature go with them and broaden them and comfort them long after you have passed away.

But if you make of it a dead thing of phrases and formalism; if you try to fill young children with the dry bones and skeletons that were of interest when your professor of philology gave them to you at college; if you fail to interpret the simple human interests of Literature to your boys and girls and fail to show them how to interpret for themselves—then have you lost your opportunity and sent them forth with husks, to be thrown away gladly and forgotten.

I append to this, as a possible diversion now and then in the regular class work, two scraps of American Humor, with an attempt at their local setting. This, of course, will not be of use to all classes, nor to all teachers. I have a notion, however, that some teachers will take these two classic bits and take pains really to interpret them to their children, express the lights and shades of their whimsical, delicious humor by voice and manner and intonation and facial expression—until the children can actually *see* them and can interpret them back again. And I have a notion that a teacher who in some such way simply teaches young people to get emotions out of Literature, to feel it, to enjoy it, to want more of it, is doing the highest and most useful kind of work.

Very cordially yours,

EDWARD HYATT.

A CALAVERAS EVENING.

A little while ago I was called to the teachers' institute in Calaveras County. To reach the county seat from Sacramento, it was necessary to go by rail to Lodi, in San Joaquin County; thence toward the Sierras thirty miles by a branch railroad to Valley Springs; and thence into the foothills on a galloping four-horse stage a dozen miles farther to a queer old town built on the sides of a gulch leading toward the Calaveras River. San Andreas is pronounced by everybody as though it were spelled San Andrays. Its streets are narrow and crooked, running at curious angles in different directions. Its business houses of the older kind are built of common country rock, faced with mastic, or of brick, and have heavy iron doors and iron window shutters. Its sidewalks are frequently interrupted by steps at different angles, and sometimes one has to turn and go down toward the street in order to continue along the sidewalk. The town dates from the early gold mining period, when every stream in this foothill region was lined with miners, washing gold from the gravels with their pans, their sluices, their long toms. Instead of a few hundred inhabitants, there were then four or five thousand people surging up and down the winding streets of San Andreas.

The people still show the free spirit and kindly, unsuspicious hospitality of the early Argonauts. As I went along the streets, a perfect stranger, this one and that one passed the time of day in friendly style. Every one was willing and anxious to give information or perform any other little service that was asked. At every opportunity invitations would come to look over business places, to visit homes, to take a meal, and other proffers of the like—I even had to decline several pressing proffers of a "drink."

The chief hotel was a solid, well built structure of brick that was put up in 1858. It stood on a street corner, where one could almost touch the buildings across the narrow street to right and left. Rearward the sidewalk sloped so steeply down that 'twas hard to keep one's footing. Inside was a large lounging room, with a big stove, heated by chunks of oak wood, for its center of attraction. Here the townspeople and the passing travelers gathered of evenings to toast their feet before the fire and to engage in social chat.

At such times many a striking and interesting thing came forth—anecdote, incident, tale, of the present time or of the long ago. It would be a treasure house for a story writer to enter.

One evening mention was made of the word *Calaveras*; and one and another explained that it meant bones or skulls, and came from the ancient remains that were common in the county. At this, some one quoted retrospectively:

"And the way they heaved those fossils in their anger was a sin
Till the skull of an old mammoth caved the head of Thompson in."

A general chuckle went round and others tried to recall more of the poem. At last the hotel man jumped up, went into the barroom, and returned with a dusty copy of Bret Harte, open at *The Society upon the Stanislaus*. Dr. Richard

Boone was in the circle. He took the book and read the poem aloud, with spirit and humorous feeling, while pipes stopped smoking and smiles went round and every one craned forward in the genial glow.

THE SOCIETY UPON THE STANISLAUS.

By BRET HARTE.

I reside at Table Mountain, and my name is Truthful James;
I am not up to small deceit, or any sinful games;
And I'll tell in simple language what I know about the row
That broke up our society upon the Stanislow.

But first I would remark, that it is not a proper plan
For any scientific gent to whale his fellow-man,
And, if any member don't agree with his peculiar whim,
To lay for that same member for to "put a head" on him.

Now nothing could be finer, or more beautiful to see,
Than the first six months' proceedings of that same society,
Till Brown of Calaveras brought a lot of fossil bones
That he found within a tunnel, near the tenement of Jones.

Then Brown he read a paper, and he reconstructed there,
From those same bones, an animal that was extremely rare;
And Jones then asked the Chair for a suspension of the rules,
Till he could prove that those same bones was one of his lost mules.

Then Brown he smiled a bitter smile, and said he was at fault.
It seemed he had been trespassing on Jones's family vault;
He was a most sarcastic man, this quiet Mr. Brown,
And on several occasions he had cleaned out the town.

Now I hold it is not decent for a scientific gent
To say another is an ass—at least, to all intent;
Nor should the individual who happens to be meant
Reply by heaving rocks at him to any great extent.

Then Abner Dean, of Angels', raised a point of order—when
A chunk of old red sandstone took him in the abdomen,
And he smiled a kind of sickly smile, and curled up on the floor,
And the subsequent proceedings interested him no more.

For, in less time than I write it, every member did engage
In a warfare with the remnants of a paleozoic age;
And the way they heaved those fossils in their anger was a sin,
Till the skull of an old mammoth caved the head of Thompson in.

And this is all I have to say of these improper games,
For I live at Table Mountain, and my name is Truthful James;
And I've told, in simple language, what I know about the row
That broke up our society upon the Stanislow.

After laugh and comment had died down a bit, Mr. Floyd, the postmaster, spoke up and told some interestingly pertinent details. Said he:

"Angels Camp, as you know, is the next town toward the mountains, twelve miles above here, and it was near there that the incident took place upon which Bret Harte founded that story.

"It was really a practical joke. There was a storekeeper at Angels named John Scribner, who loved a joke better than he loved his dinner. Also at Murphys, another old mining camp, about eight miles farther up in the mountains, lived Dr. Jones, famed through all the southern mines for his medical skill, and as an amateur scientist, whose special hobby was the collection of fossil remains. Not far away a deep, prehistoric river channel was being mined for gold. The gravels of these old channels afford the richest diggings. They are of a geologic age in which no human remains have ever been found, though sought for by scientists the world over. When the workmen began to find bits of petrified wood in this prehistoric channel a brilliant idea flashed into Scribner's mind. He would perpetrate a monumental joke on his friend, Dr. Jones.

"So he sent to an old Indian burying ground some distance away to get a skull. This cranium he carefully filled with the gravel of the ancient channel; and then buried it where the hardy miners would soon dig it out from the mine and send it up to the outer air.

"Well, Scribner's joke was a howling success—in fact, too much of a success. The specimen was accepted by Dr. Jones in good faith, and Professor Whitney, the state geologist, was notified. After examining the skull and the surroundings he declared it to be a discovery of the greatest interest and the certain proof that geologists had so long sought in vain—that man lived on the earth in that ancient era. But some there were who doubted. The newspapers took it up, first locally, then in a wider and more bitter warfare. Scientists and would-be scientists from the Pacific to the Atlantic fought over the question till the 'Calaveras skull' was as well known as the Calaveras Big Trees.

"And this is the incident with its bitter controversy which attracted Bret Harte's attention and started his brain to produce 'The Society upon the Stanislaus.' Observe that the controversy is satirized no less than the original incident," concluded the postmaster.

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After a little interval and a side remark or two, the hotel clerk began:

"I suppose you've all heard of the Jumping Frog of Calaveras. But, perhaps, you don't know that the incident which Mark Twain has made so famous took place right here, even in this very hotel.

"It's a fact. Of course it was before my time, but my father knows all about it. He is an old man now, more than ninety years of age. You ought to have him here to tell stories of this country in the past. I tell you, he could keep you going."

"Yes," said the postmaster, "I know the old man well, and I've often heard him tell that the frog story did take place right in that barroom and just about as Mark Twain tells it."

Then it was in order to get out an old paper printed in 1865 and read again, as follows:

THE NOTORIOUS JUMPING FROG OF CALAVERAS COUNTY.

By SAMUEL L. CLEMENS (MARK TWAIN).

In compliance with the request of a friend of mine, who wrote me from the East, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. I have a lurking suspicion that *Leonidas W. Smiley* is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage; and that he only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him it would remind him of his infamous *Jim Smiley*, and he would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was the design, it succeeded.

I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the barroom stove of the dilapidated tavern in the decayed mining camp of Angels, and I noticed that he was fat and bald-headed, and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance. He roused up and gave me good day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished companion of his boyhood, named *Leonidas W. Smiley*—*Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley*—a young minister of the gospel, who he had heard was at one time a resident of Angels Camp. I added that if Mr. Wheeler could tell me anything about this *Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley*, I would feel under many obligations to him.

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned his initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in *finesse*. I let him go on in his own way, and never interrupted him once.

"Rev. Leonidas W.—H'm, Reverend Le—well, there was a feller here once by the name of *Jim Smiley*, in the winter of '49, or maybe it was the spring of '50—I don't recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other, is because I remember the big flume warn't finished when he first come to the camp; but, anyway, he was the curiousest man about, always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side; and if he couldn't, he'd change sides. Anyway that suited the other side would suit *him*—any way, just so's he got a bet, *he* was satisfied. But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky; he most alway come out winner. He was always ready, and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solit'ry thing mentioned but that feller'd offer to bet on it, and take ary side you please, as I was just telling you. If there was a horse-race, you'd find him flush or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken fight, he'd bet on it; why, if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first; or if there was a camp-meeting, he would be there reg'lar to bet on Parson Walker, which he

judged to be the best exhorter about here; and so he was, too, and a good man. If he even see a straddle-bug start to go anywheres, he would bet you how long it would take him to get to—wherever he was going; and if you took him up, he would foller that straddle-bug to Mexico, but what he would find out where he was bound for, and how long he was on the road. Lots of the boys here has seen that Smiley, and can tell you about him. Why, it never made no difference to *him*—he'd bet *anything*—the dangdest feller. Parson Walker's wife laid very sick once for a good while, and it seemed as if they warn't going to save her; but one morning he come in, and Smiley up and asked him how she was, and he said she was consider'ble better—thank the Lord for his inf'nite mercy!—and coming on so smart that, with the blessing of Prov'dence, she'd get well yet; and Smiley, before he thought, says, 'Well, I'll resk two-and-a-half she don't, anyway.'

"Thish-yer Smiley had a mare—the boys called her the fifteen-minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because of course she was faster than that—and he used to win money on that horse, for all she was so slow, and always had the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind. They used to give her two or three hundred yards' start, and then pass her under way; but always at the fag-end of the race she'd get excited and desperate-like, and come cavorting and straddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air, and sometimes out to one side amongst the fences, and kicking up m-o-r-e dust and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose—and *always* fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could cipher it down.

"And he had a little small, bull-pup, that to look at him you'd think he warn't worth a cent but to set around and look onery, and lay for a chance to steal something. But as soon as money was up on him he was a different dog; his under-jaw'd begin to stick out like the fo'castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover and shine like the furnaces. And a dog might tackle him and bullyrag him, and bite him, and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson—which was the name of the pup—Andrew Jackson would never let on but what *he* was satisfied, and hadn't expected nothing else—and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up; and then all of a sudden he would grab the other dog jest by the j'int of his hind leg and freeze to it—not chaw, you understand, but only just grip and hang on till they throwed up the sponge, if it was a year. Smiley always come out winner on that pup, till he harnessed a dog once that didn't have no hind legs, because they'd been sawed off in a circular saw, and when the thing had gone along far enough, and the money was all up, and he'd come to make a snatch for his pet holt, he see in a minute how he'd been imposed upon, and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he 'peared surprised, and then he looked sorter discouraged-like, and didn't try no more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He give Smiley a look, as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was *his* fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs for him to take holt of, which was his main dependence in a fight; and then he limped off a piece and laid down and died. It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for hisself if he'd lived, for the stuff was in him and he had genius—I know it, because he hadn't no opportunities to speak of, and it don't stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them

circumstances if he hadn't no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his'n, and the way it turned out.

"Well, this-er Smiley had rat-tarriers, and chicken cocks, and tom-cats and all them kind of things, till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. He ketched a frog one day, and took him home, and said he cal'lated to educate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog to jump. And you bet you he *did* learn him, too. He'd give him a little punch behind, and the next minute you'd see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one summerset, or maybe a couple, if he got a good start, and come down flat-footed and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of ketching flies, and kep' him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a fly every time as fur as he could see him. Smiley said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do 'most anything—and I believe him. Why I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out, 'Flies, Dan'l, flies!' and quicker'n you could wink he'd spring straight up and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor ag'in as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doin' any more'n any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straight for'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair and square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand; and when it come to that Smiley would ante up money on him as long as he had a red. Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had traveled and been everywhere, all said he laid it over any frog that ever *they* see.

"Well, Smiley kep' the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him down-town sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come acrost him with his box, and says:

"What might it be that you've got in the box?"

"And Smiley says, sorter indifferent-like, 'It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't—it's just only a frog.'

"And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, 'H'm—so 'tis. Well, what's *he* good for?"

"Well,' Smiley says, easy and careless, 'he's good enough for *one* thing, I should judge—he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.'

"The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley, and says, very deliberate, 'Well,' he says, 'I don't see no p'int about that frog that's any better'n any other frog.'

"Maybe you don't,' Smiley says. 'Maybe you understand frogs, and maybe you don't understand 'em; maybe you've had experience, and maybe you ain't only a amature, as it were. Anyways, I've got *my* opinion, and I'll resk forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.'

"And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad like, 'Well, I'm only a stranger here, and I ain't got no frog; but if I had a frog, I'd bet you.'

"And then Smiley says, 'That's all right—that's all right—if you'll hold my box a minute, I'll go and get you a frog.' And so the feller took the box, and put up his forty dollars along with Smiley's, and set down to wait.

"So he set there a good while, thinking and thinking to hisself, and then he got the frog out and prized his mouth open, and took a teaspoon and filled him full of quail shot—filled him pretty near up to his chin—and set him on the floor. Smiley he went to the swamp and slopped around in the mud for a long time, and finally he ketched a frog, and fetched him in, and give him to this feller, and says:

"Now, if you're ready, set him alongside of Dan'l, with his forepaws just even with Dan'l's, and I'll give the word.' Then he says, 'One—two—three—*git!*' and him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind, and the new frog hopped off lively, but Dan'l give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders—so—like a Frenchman, but it warn't no use—he couldn't budge; he was planted as solid as a church, and he couldn't no more stir than if he was anchored out. Smiley was a good deal surprised, and he was disgusted, too, but he didn't have no idea what the matter was, of course.

"The feller took the money and started away; and when he was going out at the door, he sorter jerked his thumb over his shoulder—so—at Dan'l, and says again, very deliberate, 'Well,' he says, '*I don't see no p'int about that frog that's better'n any other frog.*'

"Smiley he stood scratching his head and looking down at Dan'l a long time, and at last he says, 'I do wonder what in the nation that frog throw'd off for—I wonder if there ain't something the matter with him—he 'pears to look mighty baggy, somehow.' And he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck, and hefted him, and says, 'Why, blame my cats if he don't weigh five pound!' and turned him upside down, and he belched out a double handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man—he set the frog down and took out after the feller, but he never ketched him. And—"

[Here Simon Wheeler heard his name called from the front yard, and got up to see what was wanted.] Turning to me as he moved away, he said: "Just set where you are, stranger, and rest easy—I ain't going to be gone a second."

But, by your leave, I did not think that a continuation of the history of the enterprising vagabond *Jim Smiley* would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. *Leonidas W. Smiley*, and so I started away.

At the door I met the sociable Wheeler returning, and he button-holed me, and re-commenced:

"Well, this-er Smiley had a yaller, one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail, only jest a short stump like a bannanner, and—"

However, lacking both time and inclination, I did not wait to hear about the afflicted cow, but took my leave."

* * * * *

After the reading there ensued some desultory conversation round the fire about Mark Twain and his droll humor, and how he and Bret Harte ranged through the hills and mining camps in the immediate neighborhood. The long, flat, volcanic level of Table Mountain, the Big Tree Grove, and other interesting natural features of the county were well known to them. Here they lived and breathed and had their being in the good old days of gold.

Soon the group thinned out; the fire died down; and the Calaveras evening came to a close.

Finis.

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